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They were nothing like the animals he knew on earth...

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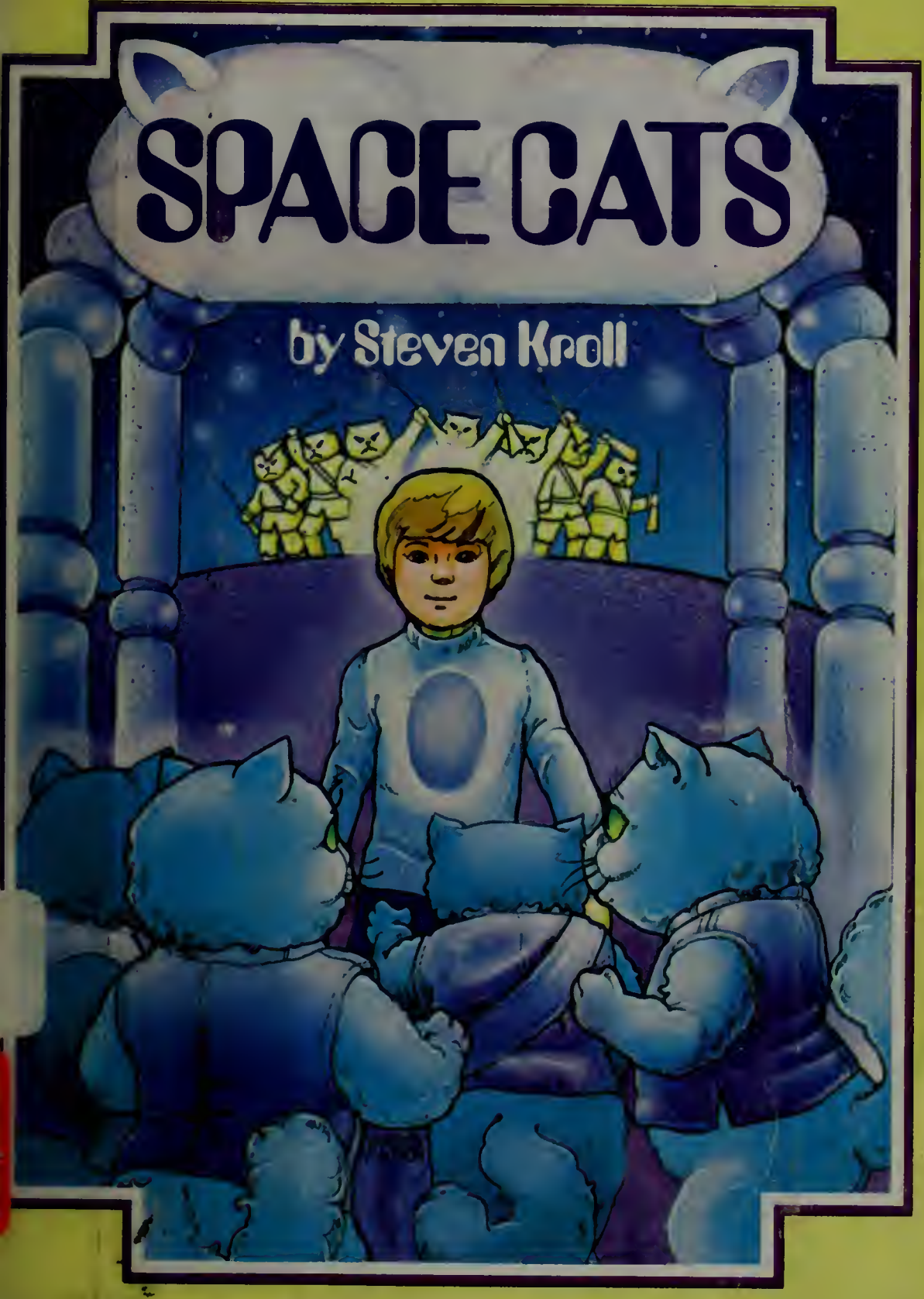
SPACE CATS

by Steven Kroll



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SPACE CATS

STEVEN KROLL's childhood was filled with books. As he read, his imagination took him to many distant places, and he resolved that some day he would become a writer. He and his cat, Alexander, live in New York City, where he has worked as an editor and book reviewer and has written fiction for adults as well as children.

FRISO HENSTRA is an award-winning Dutch artist who has illustrated many American books.

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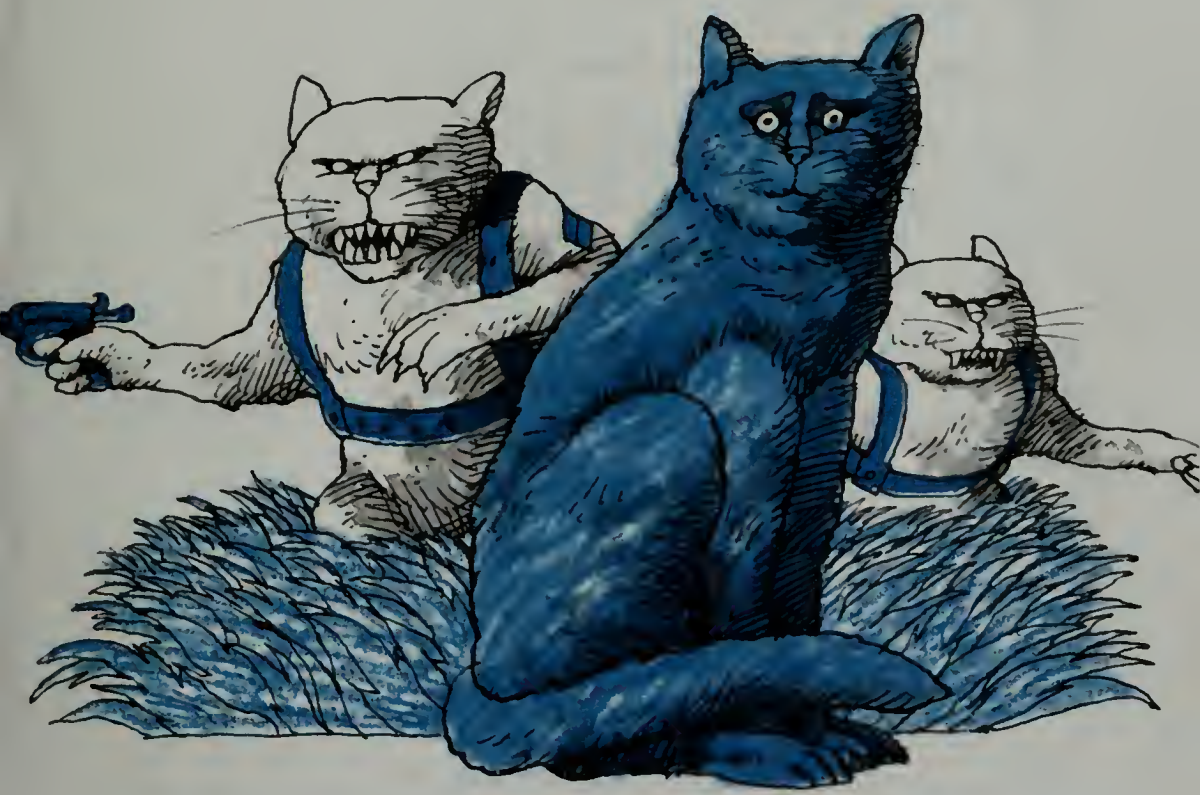
Illustrated by Friso Henstra



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For John and Kate Briggs

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The Cat

One day Perry came home from school, and found a cat in front of his door. The cat was very big. It had long, blue-gray hair and gigantic, round eyes.

"Hey," Perry said. "Would you mind moving?"

The cat just sat there.

"Come on," said Perry. "Please get out of the way."

The cat moved to one side. He sat and stared at Perry. Perry opened the door. The cat walked in after him. Within a few days, it was clear the cat had come to stay.

Perry called him Alexander.

The Friends

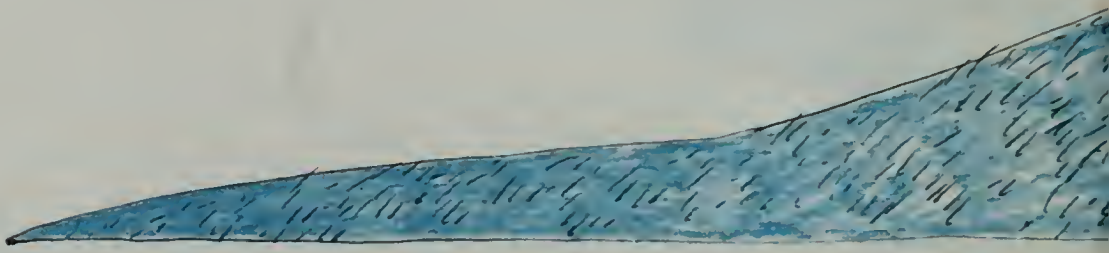
After a while, Perry and Alexander became friends. When Alexander hid under the bed, Perry crawled after him and scratched his ears. Alexander purred and made lots of funny, squeaking noises.

When Perry brushed his teeth, Alexander sat on the toilet seat and watched.

When Perry walked around the house, Alexander walked right behind him.

And sometimes, when Perry was falling asleep, Alexander would jump onto the bed. He would bump Perry's nose with his, and curl up on the pillow.

But Perry still couldn't figure out where the cat had come from. Once, when they were walking



down the hall, Perry turned and said, "Why are you here?"

He was sure he saw a sly smile cross Alexander's face.

The Shirt

When Perry went to his room after dinner one night, he found Alexander sitting on the bed. He picked him up and hugged him. Alexander snuggled up against Perry's shoulder and purred.

Perry had had a long day. He'd been to school and baseball practice. Then he'd gone to his friend Michael's house and played Ping-Pong. He was very, very tired.

Perry put down Alexander and took off his shirt. As he pulled it over his head, a strange thing happened. Alexander began to glow, and the glow was bright blue. He glowed brighter and brighter, and then, suddenly, he disappeared.

Perry sat looking at the spot where Alexander had been.

"Alexander?"

There was no reply. Not a single squeaking noise or purr. Perry looked under the bed. He raced around the room. He looked behind his desk and bureau. Then he opened the closet door.

There was a flash of blue light that settled into a blue glow. The glow was exactly like Alexander's when he disappeared, and it was coming from a shirt Perry had never seen before.

The shirt was white with a big blue oval in the middle. Perry pulled it out of the closet and put it on. A perfect fit. The blue glow from the oval grew even brighter. A loud beeping noise sounded through the room.

The noise was not unlike Alexander's familiar squeaking.

The Tarvishian

The noise grew louder. The glow got brighter and became a flicker. Then the flicker disappeared along with the blue. In the oval, a face appeared that looked like Alexander's.

Perry stepped in front of the mirror to see better.

The beeping noise stopped. The cat's face smiled. "Hello," it said. "Remember me?"

"Alexander?" Perry said. "Is that you?"

"Of course," said Alexander. "Who did you think it was?"

"But you were here just a minute ago. What's happened?"

"I am a Tarvishian," said Alexander. "I had to go back to Tarvish."

"A Tarvishian?" said Perry. "What's that?"

"We live in the country of Tarvish on the planet Floralderon in the faraway galaxy of Donnigar. You have been very kind to me, and I have returned to ask if you would like to visit us."

"Visit?" said Perry. "Visit you in Tarvish?"

"Yes," said Alexander. "You would be my special guest."

Perry paused a moment. "Thank you, Alexander. I'd love to come," he said finally.

"Then go to the window," said Alexander.

The Journey

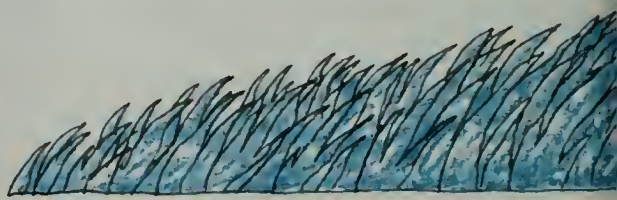
The oval in the shirt went blank. Perry went to the window and flung it open. A glowing blue cat craft was waiting.

The front looked like the face of a grinning cat. The rest was shaped like a cat's long, sleek body. Perry stepped inside. A blue space suit hung from the wall. He put it on. On the board in front of him were many buttons. One said: Tarvish. Another said: Earth. Perry pressed the button that said Tarvish. In a great rush of air, he was off.

As the moon passed by, a metal paw came out from the wall holding a cup of milk.

Perry flipped up his visor and took a sip.

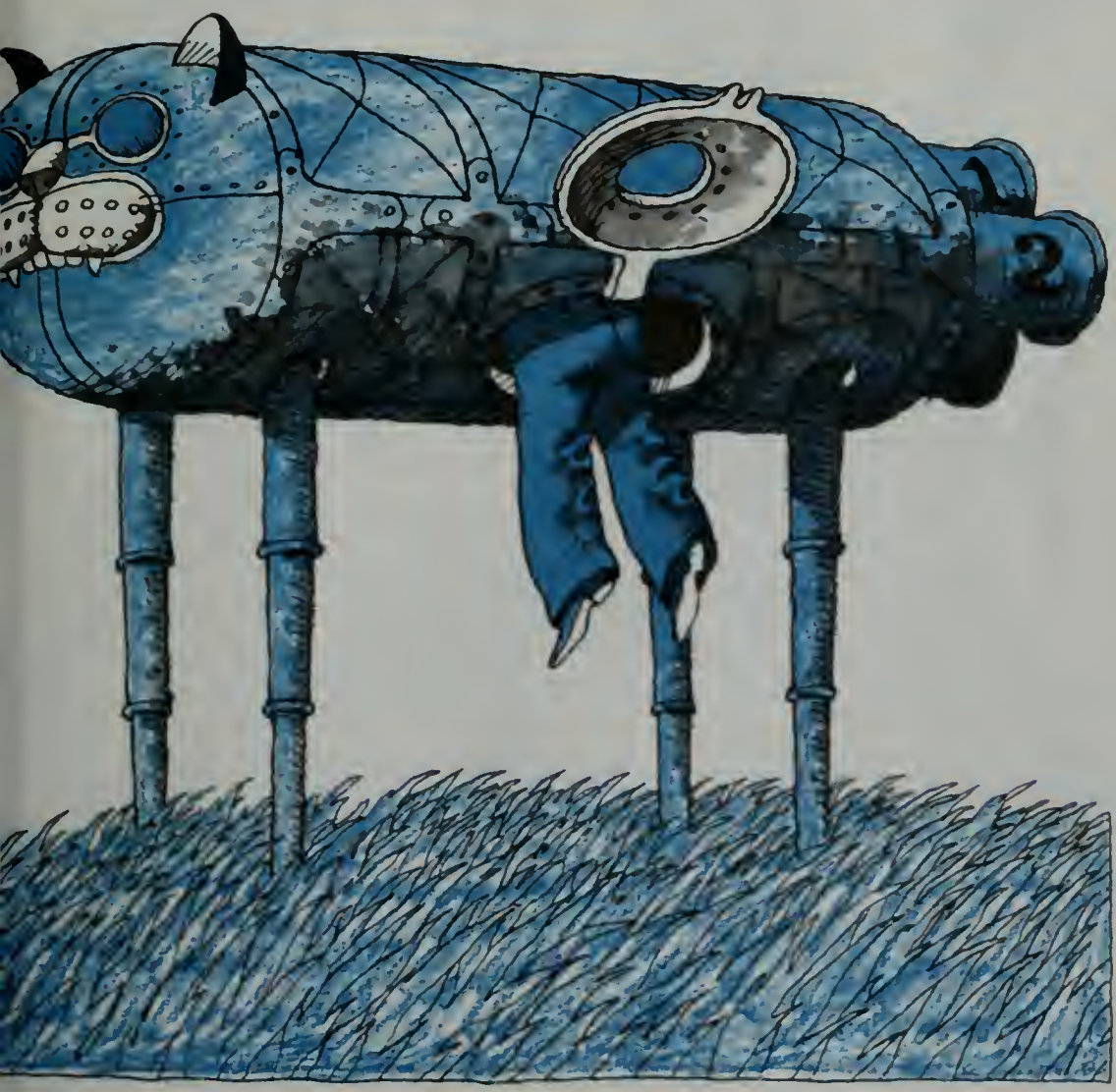
He was traveling very fast. Mars passed by and



then Jupiter. The rings of Saturn appeared and vanished.

Then the darkness began to change from black to shining blue. The cat craft shuddered, lurched, and coasted to a landing. The door burst open. Perry slipped out of his space suit and stepped onto soft blue grass.

He had arrived in Tarvish.



The Welcome

Perry looked around. Everything was blue. Blue trees. Blue hills. Blue stones.

"We're glad you could come," said a voice.

Perry looked to his left. There, ten feet away, were two cats that looked like Alexander.

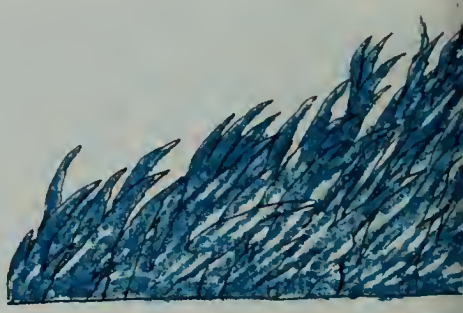
"We are Florian and Joss," said the first cat. "We will take you to our king."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," said Perry. "I've just come to see Alexander."

"*Your* Alexander is *our* king," said Joss.

"Your *king?*" said Perry.

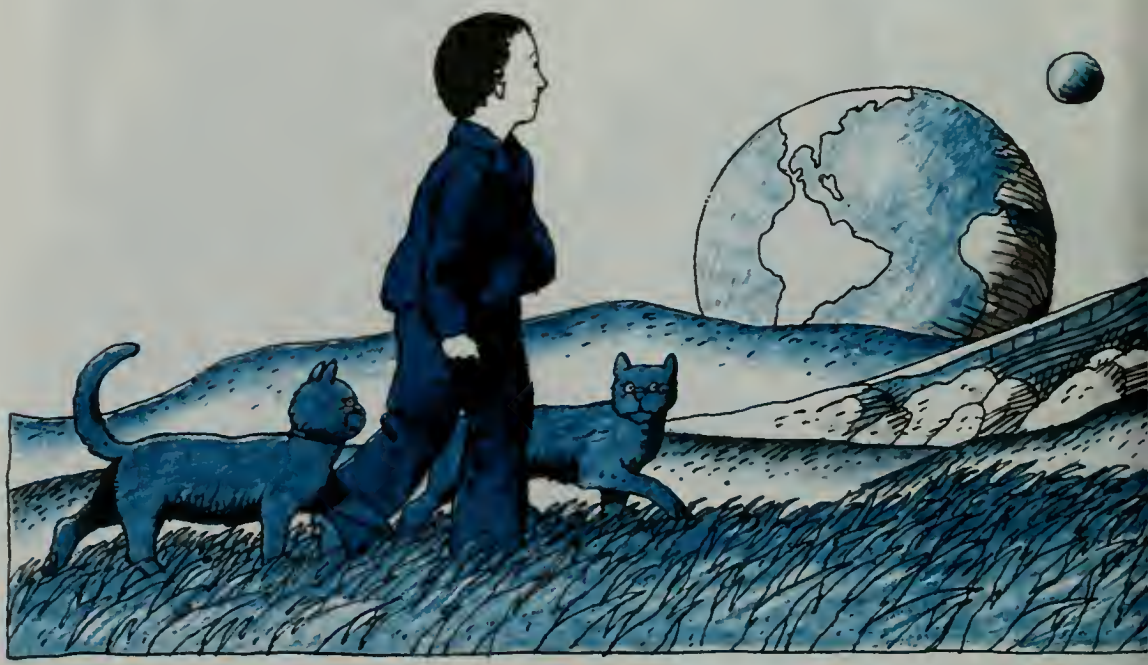
"It is the truth," said Florian. "Now if you will follow us."



The Request

Perry followed Florian and Joss across the blue field. To the right he saw more hills. Some of them were dotted with caves. He could hear strange, rumbling noises in the distance.

As they reached the edge of the field, a shape loomed out of the blueness. It looked like a gigantic, crouching, blue cat.



Perry stopped in his tracks. "What's that?" he asked.

"That," said Florian proudly, "is our cat castle."

Florian and Joss led Perry over a bridge and into the cat's mouth. They walked down a long blue hall lined with statues of heroic Tarvishians. At the end Florian opened a cat-shaped, blue door.

Perry stepped into a room covered in blue fur. Along one wall were models of all the stars of Donnigar. In the middle, on a cat-shaped throne, sat Alexander.

He was wearing a crown and a blue sash. He looked just like a king.

"Hi," said Perry. "You should have told me you were king."

"You'd never have believed me," said Alexander.

"I guess not," said Perry. "This is a great place."

"Thank you," said Alexander. "Now I have something important to discuss with you."

"What is it?" asked Perry.

"I will keep my story brief. Our neighboring country is Bolderonia. The Bolderonians are white, and so is Bolderonia. It is so bright there that the Bolderonians prefer to live underground. They are very large for cats, much larger than we are, and very warlike. They only leave their underground homes to fight battles. Their leader, Argon, has been trying to destroy us for twenty years."

"Those must be the noises I heard," said Perry.

"Yes," said Alexander. "There is fighting along our eastern border. Today there will be an important battle. We want to defeat the Bolderonians once and for all. We are hoping you will be part of our secret plan."

"So that's the real reason you invited me here," said Perry.

"Yes," said Alexander. "You were so kind to me on earth. I thought you might agree to help us."

"What do I have to do?"

"We have built a model of a giant Tarvishian. It is not too much bigger than you are. We would like you to climb inside it and go to the battlefield. When the Bolderonians see you, we hope they'll be scared back to Bolderonia. They've never seen

a giant Tarvishian before, and you will be three times the size of Argon!"

Perry's tongue caught in his throat. "Can they shoot me?" he asked.

"No," said Alexander. "Cat pistols fire whiskery beams of light. The beams can kill, but they cannot pierce the costume."

"Then I'll help you," said Perry.

The Disguise

Perry was taken to a special cave behind the castle. The cat model was there. Its eyes flashed. Its teeth were bared. Its fur glowed blue.

Perry stepped into the hind legs. He pulled the top half over his shoulders. It was heavy. He could see out a little beam-proof window in the open mouth. After a few minutes of practice, he could walk, even run, without stumbling too much.

Alexander led Perry from the cave to the royal hovercraft. Perry was carefully lowered into a cart attached to the back. Alexander sat beside Treadbolt, the royal chauffeur.

As they approached the battlefield, Perry heard the hum of whisker beams and the whine of cat craft overhead. The Tarvishians were retreating.

The Bolderonians were chasing them.

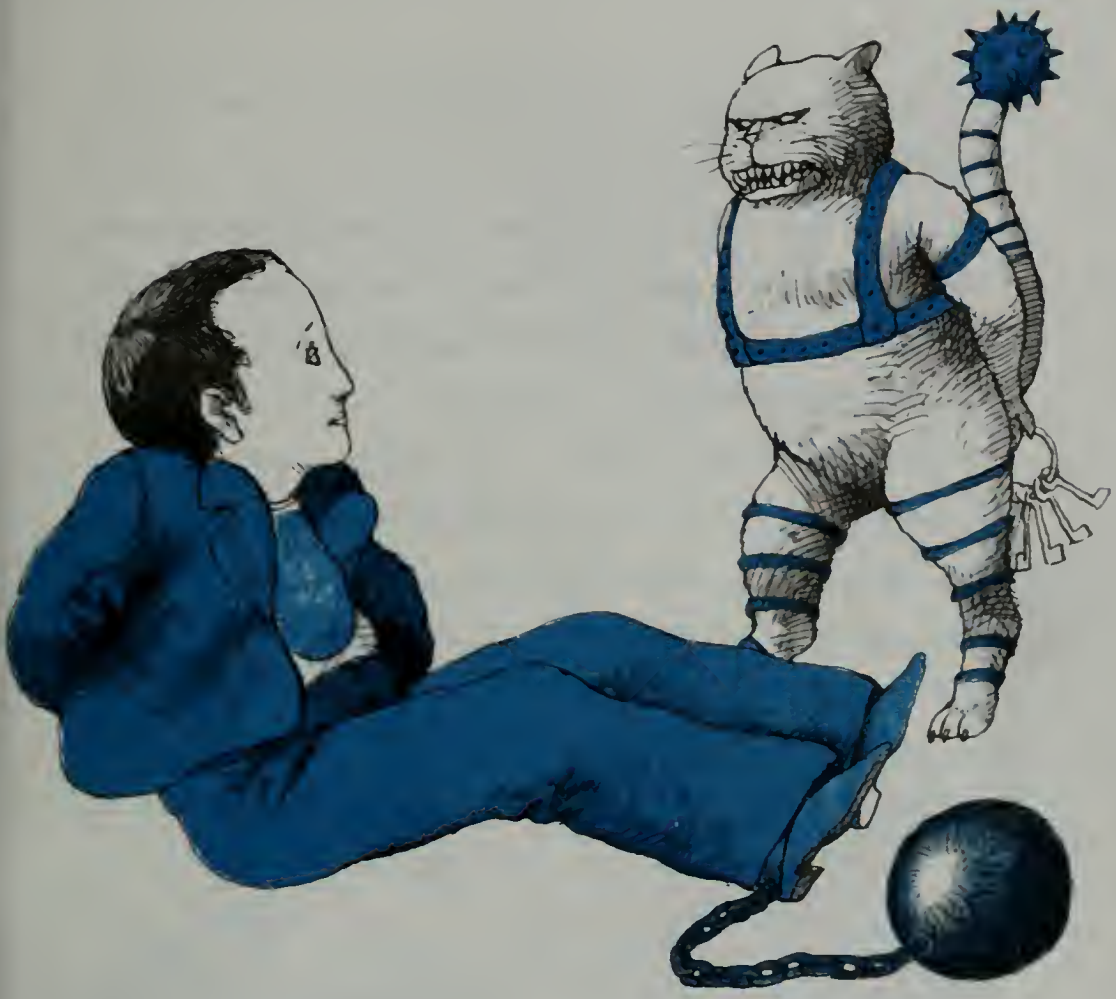
Redux, the Tarvishian general, ran up to Alexander. They talked for a moment. Then Alexander turned to Perry.

"It's up to you now," he said. "Good luck."

Perry took a deep breath and charged out onto the battlefield. White shapes darted here and there. Someone shouted "Run, run!"

Bolderonians began to melt away before him. Their whisker beams bounced off his costume as

they retreated. He heard a slight puffing noise. A net snaked around him. He had been shot by a secret Bolderonian net pistol! He fell. Fluffy white cats quickly climbed on his chest, and the last thing he heard before he passed out was a voice saying "It's not a Tarvishian! It's an earth-child!"



The Prisoner

The underground jail cell was very cold, very damp, and very white. The guard's name was Horvath. He walked up and down in front of Perry, waving his ring of keys and flashing his ugly fangs.

"You know what?" said Horvath after walking

up and down for about the seventeenth time.

"What?" said Perry.

Horvath went to the door and peered out to see if anyone was coming. Then he curled up in front of Perry's cell and smiled through the ugly fangs. "I kind of like you," he said.

"Thanks," said Perry. "Thanks a lot."

Horvath got up and walked around some more. "Can I get you something to eat?" he asked. "A bowl of milk perhaps? A nice fish?"

"No, no thanks," said Perry. "But could you get me out of here?"

"Sorry," said Horvath. "Wish I could, but it's too late."

"Too late?" asked Perry.

"Yup. You'll be dead in a few minutes."

"Dead?" asked Perry. "In a few minutes?"

"Sure," said Horvath. "They're going to execute you. The way they do with all their prisoners. You're sure you wouldn't like that fish?"

Perry's stomach turned over. He felt dizzy. "Well," said Horvath, "if I can't get *you* something to eat, I guess I'll have something myself."

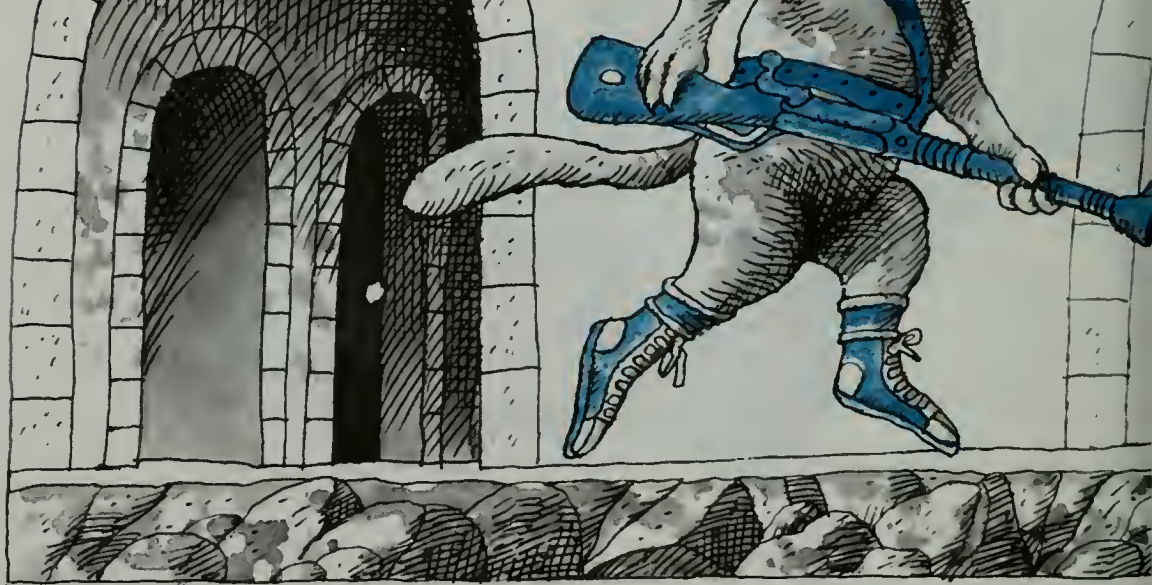
While Horvath munched on a sardine, Perry looked down at his tattered magic shirt. What he

needed was a message from Alexander, something to give him hope. He rubbed at the oval, trying to produce a glow. He rubbed again. There was a little flicker, a very low beeping noise, and the words "Can't . . . can't get . . . can't get through." Then the flicker and beep disappeared.

Argon

Three sets of Bolderonian boots marched down the passageway. Three sets of Bolderonian paws pounded on the jailer's door.

"Okay," said Horvath. "Sorry, boy. This is it."

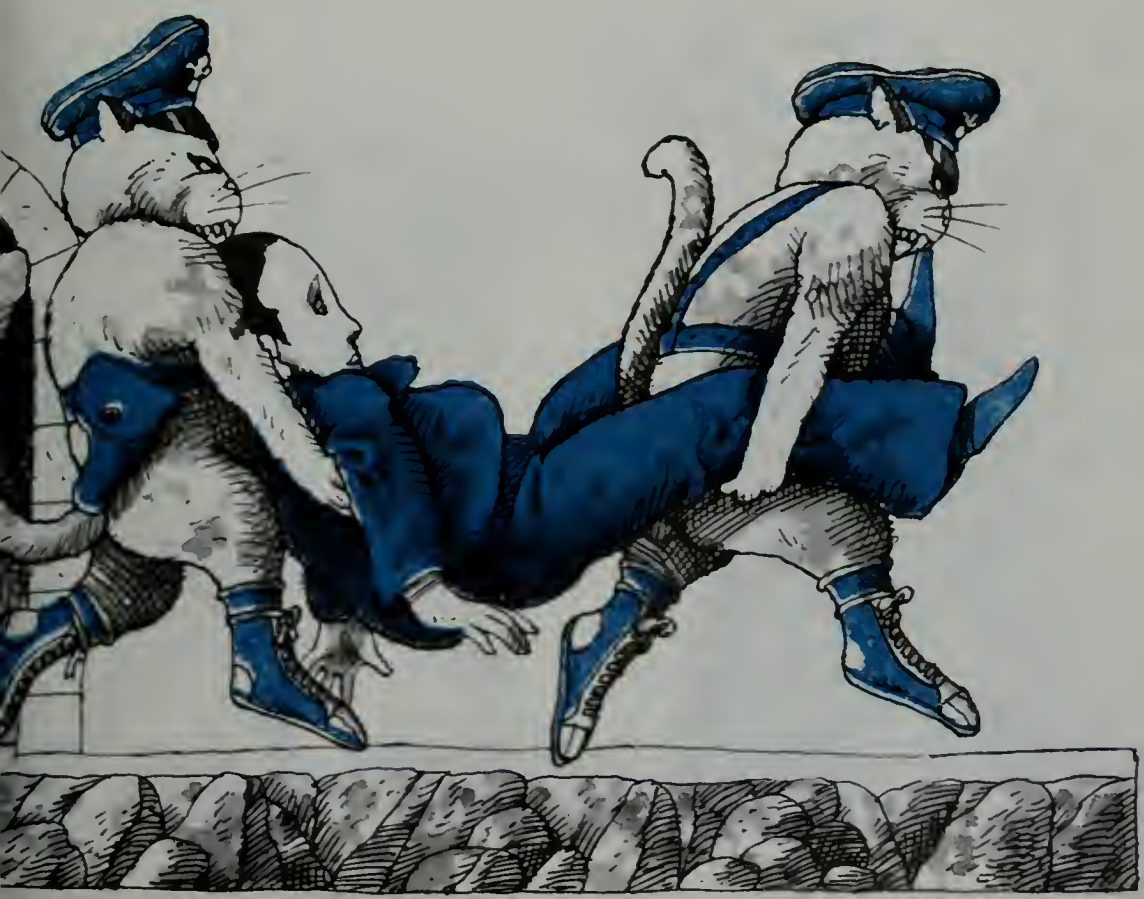


The door was flung open. Three Bolderonian police cats seized Perry from his cell. They carried him off down the white, dimly lit passageway.

All along the route were entrances to other passageways that led to more doors, more paths, more entrances, more exits.

Finally they reached a large black door with a white knob. Perry was set down in front of it.

The door opened. Perry was pushed into a huge



cave. On one side was a shimmering, underground lake. On the other was a long, white table. Behind it, in highbacked chairs, were five stern Bolderonians.

"Step this way" came a voice. And Perry was shoved in front of the table.

"Perry," said the Bolderonian in the middle. "I am Argon, ruler of Bolderonia. You will now be executed for the trick you played on us. Officers, bring on the bag and toss him in the lake."

"No!" said Perry. "Please."

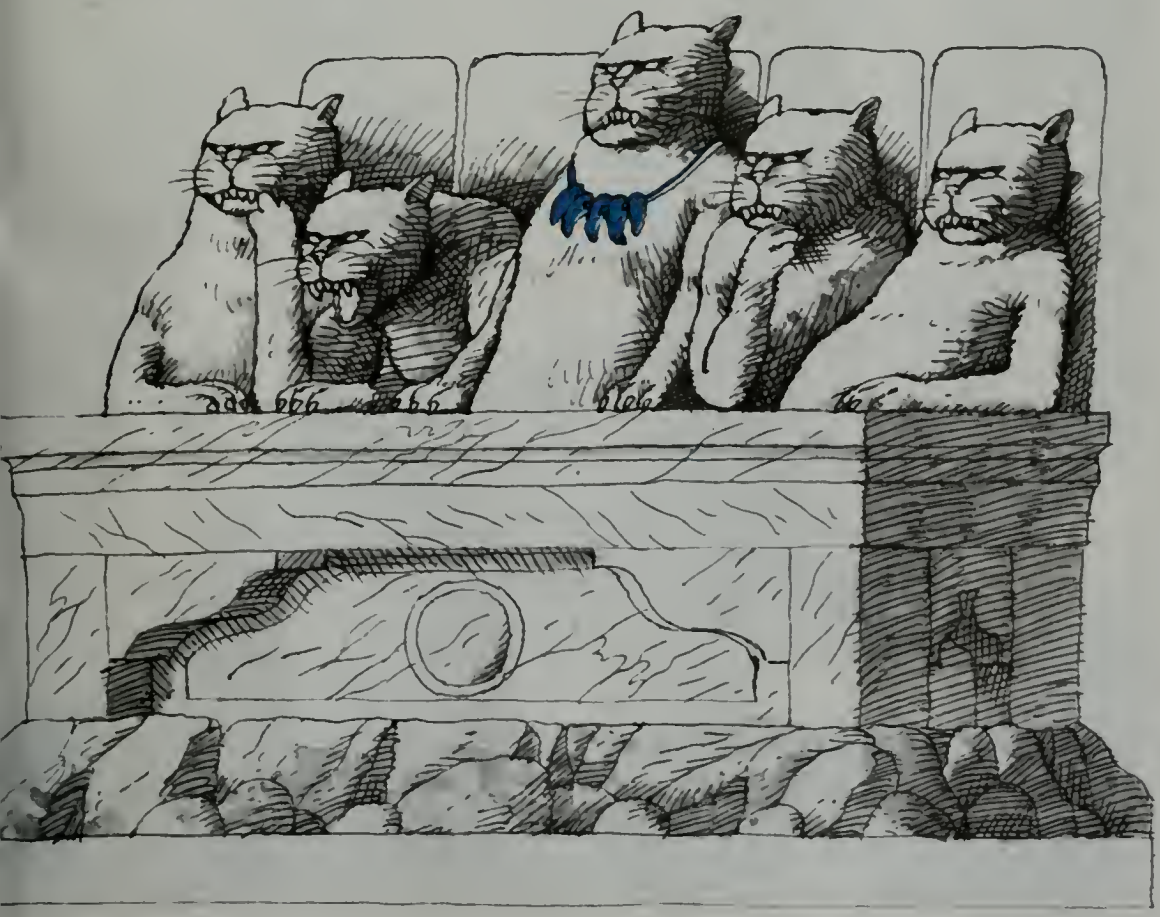
"Wait!"

Everyone turned toward the door. Before it stood a young Bolderonian. She said, "I am Nomura, niece of Argon. We must have your magic shirt before we execute you. Step this way."

"Do as you are told," said Argon.

Perry walked over to Nomura. She placed a paw inside the top button of his shirt. She whispered quickly in his ear. "Remember. Cats hate water. It's your only chance. Go. Now."

Perry raced toward the lake. He reached the edge and dove, dove far, dove deep, dove for his life.



The Passage

He swam in circles underwater. There was no way out of the lake, no way out of the cave. He groped along the walls beneath the surface until he came to a hole! It was just big enough to fit through. He pushed his way in, struggling and kicking. He groped down a passageway barely as wide as his body.

He was running out of breath. Gasping, he rose to the surface.

The light was so bright, it hurt his eyes. The land on either side was white. He climbed out of the water. He crawled up the bank. At the top was a camp of Bolderonian soldiers!

"Well," said one. "Look what we have here."

Immediately he was surrounded. He tried not to move. There was nowhere else to run.

Nomura

Suddenly, hundreds of Tarvishian cat craft zoomed down. Tarvishians dropped cat-bombs on Bolderonians. Bolderonians shot whisker beam pistols at Tarvishians. Soon a battle was raging.

Perry crouched down in the white grass. He was wondering what to do next when a huge, white, Bolderonian fighter cruised in beside him.

Nomura stepped out of the cockpit. "Get in," she said. "Hurry. You're going home."

Perry climbed inside. Nomura took off in the middle of some crossfire. It wasn't until they were airborne that Perry could ask his question.

"You," he said to her. "Why are you helping me?"

"I couldn't stand to see Argon execute one more

prisoner. I hate him, and I hate this war."

A Tarvishian cat craft appeared in front of them. Nomura dipped down to avoid an attack. The fighter spun crazily out of control. "Hold on tight," Nomura said. "Your cat craft's right below us."

The fighter shuddered as Nomura pulled out

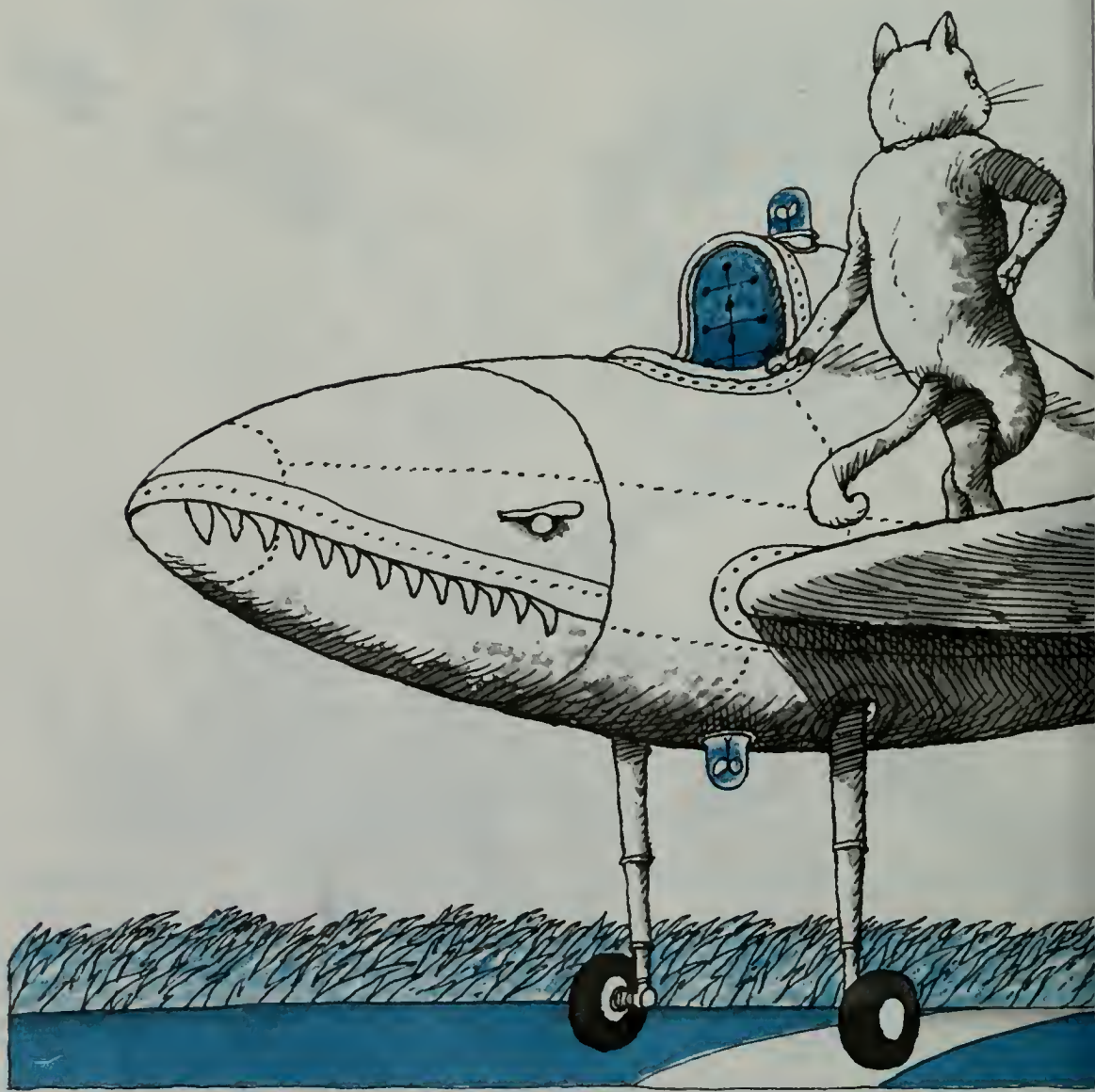
of the spin. She grabbed the landing stick, and they swooped down beside the cat craft.

"Did it," she said. "Now hurry."

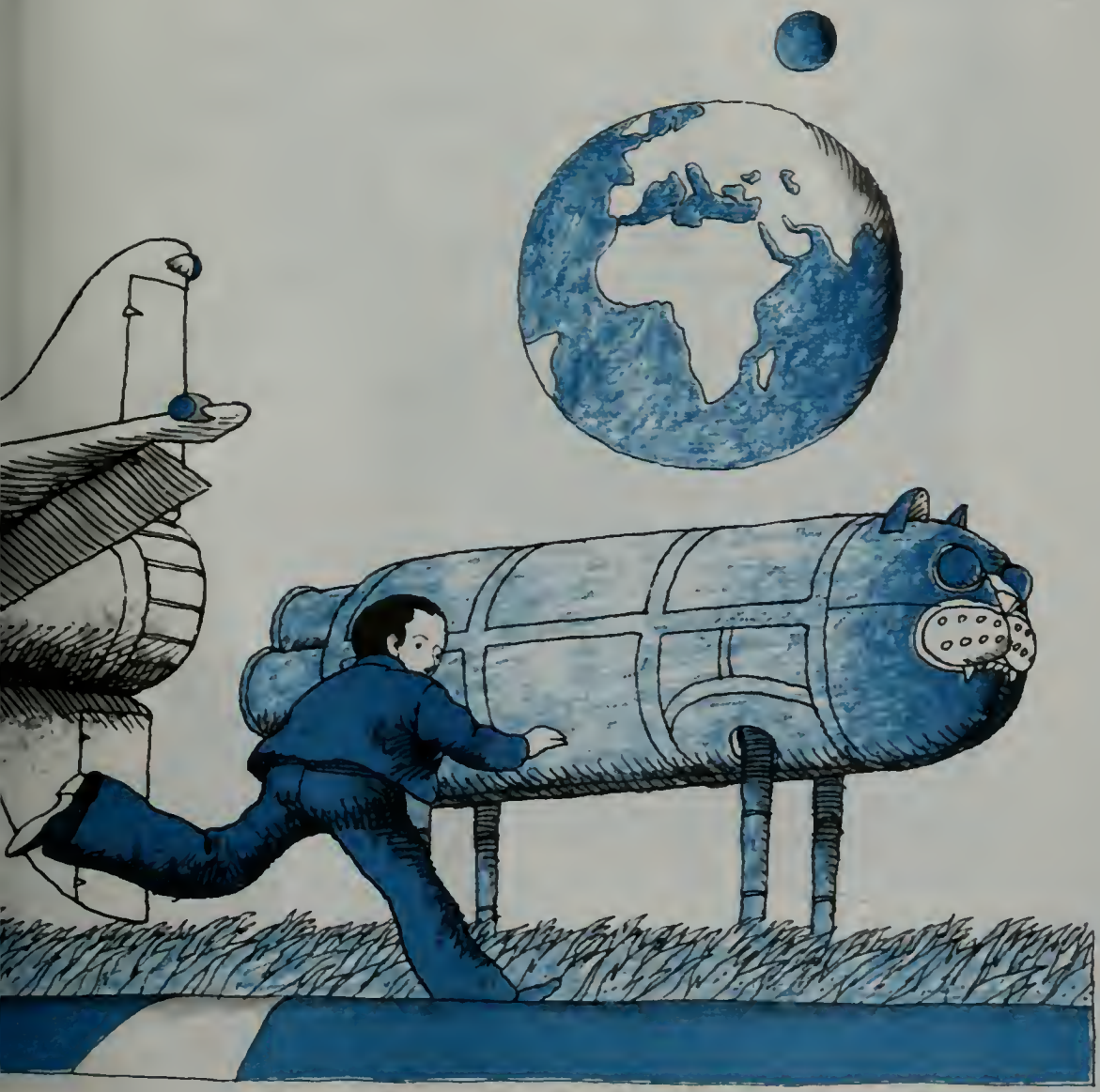
"You'll be all right?" asked Perry.

"Of course I'll be all right."

"Okay," he said.



He opened the cockpit door and jumped out. He ran to the cat craft. He stepped inside and put on the space suit. The door closed behind him. He pressed the button for earth and was off. The planets rose up at him as he sped through space. In an instant he was back on the window ledge.



Home

His room was just as he'd left it. He brushed his teeth, put on his pajamas, and climbed into bed.

But he couldn't sleep. *Alexander,* he kept thinking. *Nomura.*

He must have dozed off, but around two in the morning, he woke up. There was something on his bed. A wet nose bumped his. It was Alexander!

"Alexander!" Perry whispered. "It's really you!"

Alexander bumped his nose again. Perry noticed the magic shirt lying on the bed.

He picked it up and put it on. Then he jumped up and stood in front of the mirror.

The blue oval began to glow. The beeping noise followed and grew louder. The glow turned

to a flicker, the noise and flicker disappeared, and there was Nomura.

"Hello," she said. "How's it going?"

Perry smiled. "How's it going with *you?*"

"Okay," she said. "Argon has been killed, and peace has been made. I've been chosen queen of Bolderonia and Tarvish. Alexander wants to stay with you."

"He does?" said Perry. "He really does?"

"Yes. Good luck to you, Perry."

"Good luck to you, Nomura."

But the oval had gone blank.

With his arm around Alexander, Perry went back to sleep.

STRANGE CATS

When a stray cat followed Perry home one day, he never dreamed it was more than just an ordinary cat. But Alexander was far from ordinary. As alien king of Tarvish, on the faraway planet of Floralderon, Alexander had come to lure Perry away on a dangerous mission. His peace-loving land where the blue cats lived was threatened by the neighboring Bolderonians—fierce war-loving white cats who would stop at nothing to destroy Tarvish. It was up to Perry to save his true blue friends, and drive their white-whiskered enemies forever from their land.

"Geared to....children that thrive on excitement and action, this space-age story helps fill a void of science fiction for primary-age children.... Chapters are short and readable and Henstra's sinister faces, rocketing cat ships, and deadly guns are nicely balanced by a calm and steady Perry."

KIRKUS REVIEWS

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